

# Church and State in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1956 Part III

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*In Parts I and II of this three-part article, published in RCL Vol. 14, Nos 1 and 2, Karel Kaplan described in detail developments in church-state relations in Czechoslovakia during the years immediately following the communist takeover in February 1948. Up to June 1949, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state was characterised by efforts towards agreement; after June 1949, with the founding of a regime-controlled priests' movement — Catholic Action — the relationship was dominated by open conflict.*

*Catholic Action failed as a political movement, and the government went on to try further measures aimed at limiting the activities of the Catholic Church. Between March and September 1950 many priests and laymen connected with bishops were arrested. The bishops, deprived of their closest confidants, were isolated from the clergy and the population at large. Realisation that there was no hope of easing the pressure led some bishops to turn again to negotiation with the government, whose chief representative responsible for these matters was Fierlinger, Chairman of the Office for Religious Affairs.*

*We resume Kaplan's account of events with the steps taken by several bishops in September 1950 towards initiating negotiations.*

At the beginning of September, Pobožný expressed the desire to meet Fierlinger. On 14 September, Čarský wrote to Trochta about the usefulness of reopening the negotiations. Lazík, Nescény and Pobožný also agreed. Six days later, Trochta recommended to Matocha that he should request a private discussion with Fierlinger which could produce concrete proposals to offer for consideration to an episcopal conference. Two days later, Matocha entrusted to a consistory commissar the task of arranging an unofficial meeting with Fierlinger which "... would enable him to enquire into the possibilities of further negotiations and agreement." He also indicated that "... he had found a way which might make it possible

to come to an agreement even without the co-operation of the Vatican." The Office for Religious Affairs also interpreted the actions of other church dignitaries as an effort to achieve a renewal of negotiations. These included a visit from Rabas, sent by Trochta concerning the matter of diocesan seminaries; a visit from Hloucha's sister, who informed them of her brother's willingness to negotiate; Pícha's appointment to a professorial post at a new Theological Faculty; and even the discussions about the new faculty with Beran\* himself. In the course of these discussions, Beran allegedly said that he was sincerely willing to negotiate and to forget the past. The present situation was quite different, as different people were in charge. This statement about Beran's attitude comes from a report by an official of the Office for Religious Affairs. As for Beran's remark about "different people", he probably had in mind Fierlinger, who had taken over from Čepička as head of that Office.

The bishops' wish to negotiate was on the agenda of the "Church Six"\*\*\* meeting held on 29 September. Fierlinger had asked for Plojhar's opinion beforehand. Plojhar was in favour of negotiations, and suggested laying down conditions whose fulfilment would constitute an absolute victory for the state. To the conditions formulated by Fierlinger, Plojhar added the dismissal of Bishops Vojtaššák and Pícha, and the nomination of two Patriotic Priests, Oliva and Lukačevič, in their place. Some of the members of the "Church Six" did not consider negotiations useful. Čepička had the strongest doubts. In the end, four conditions were agreed upon:

- 1) unqualified recognition of the laws on religion;
- 2) recognition of the movement of Patriotic Priests;
- 3) one or two dioceses to be given to newly-ordained bishops from the "patriotic" ranks;
- 4) reversal of all church punishments pronounced by bishops.

The Presidium of the Central Committee discussed these proposals on 9 October. It decided to postpone the negotiations until after the church trials which were being prepared.

Preparations for these church show-trials had been taking place since the beginning of 1950. Their political flavour had both international and national aspects. Internationally, they formed part of the series of similar church trials taking place in other Eastern-bloc countries. The most important of these was the trial of Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary, and the falsified evidence of hostile activity by the Vatican presented during the trial of Rajko. The Czech trials

\*The church's Primate, Archbishop Josef Beran.

\*\* An advisory body subordinate to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

were also aimed against the Vatican. On the national level, they were being used against the bishops. They had to contribute to the task of eliminating the episcopate, so that the road to the creation of the government's own obedient church hierarchy would be clear and without obstacles.

The organs of State Security and the Ministry of Justice had been collecting evidence against many church dignitaries. When the "Church Six" decided on 27 February 1950 to institute court proceedings against representatives of the religious orders, the main attack, against the bishops, was postponed. Even the organs responsible did not know if they should aim at the bishops directly or indirectly — that is, through an attack on their nearest collaborators. However, on 31 March the "Church Six" had already decided to arrest the auxiliary Bishop Buzalka, and to prepare measures against Gojdič and Zela, similar to those taken during "Action K". On 18 July, the preparations for the trial of Buzalka and Zela were on the agenda of the Security Commission of the Central Committee. They were arrested on the same day, together with other persons close to the archbishops. On 30 August three trials were suggested. This suggestion was approved by the "Church Six" and Fierlinger presented it to the Presidium on 20 September. The first trial should have been of 14 persons accused of fraud. The second should have dealt with 21 higher dignitaries who had collaborated with the bishops, Zela in particular. The third should have been the trial of Gojdič and Buzalka, and possibly also Bishop Vojtaššák. Although this blow was directed mainly at the bishops' confidants, it clearly posed the question of how politically useful further trials of bishops and archbishops would be. In every government department concerned with this matter there were groups in favour of such a step. Fierlinger's report admitted that "a radical liquidation of the whole episcopate" would mean "a great simplification of church-state relations". On the other hand, it would complicate the problem by making it far more difficult to win over the clergy and the faithful. He recommended that criminal proceedings be instituted only against the persons suggested. The aim of such action would be to draw attention to the political responsibility of the bishops, thus "... making it possible to revoke their licences of office whenever it should be necessary, to isolate them in monasteries, and, should the need arise, to punish them." The Presidium of the Central Committee approved the political concept of the trials, yet decided on two trials only — one of Czechs, the other of Slovaks — which should take place before the beginning of December.

The Coordinating Commission for Religious Trials at the Ministry of Justice selected the defendants for both trials on 15 September.

Besides Zela, nine confidants of both archbishops and some members of the religious orders, including Abbot Opasek, were to be the accused at the Czech trial. Vojtaššák was put in dock at the Slovak trial as well.

A special political working party was entrusted with the intensive preparation of both trials. It met with complications caused by Vojtaššák's refusal to sign the statements made during his interrogations. For this reason, the Czech trial started on 27 November, but the Slovak one only on 10 January 1951. The machinations directed behind the scenes by Junior Minister Karel Klos, as well as the "production" of various resolutions, functioned perfectly. All the accused were convicted. The sentences were heavy, ranging from ten years of penal servitude to imprisonment for life. In February, further trials of the so-called bishops' confidants took place.

Two weeks after the end of the Slovak trial, the Presidium of the Central Committee asked Fierlinger to find out if any bishops were now willing to take the oath of loyalty and to consecrate new bishops. It was not a question of negotiating with the bishops, but of the oath of loyalty being taken by those selected by the Office for Religious Affairs. Fierlinger reported that secret "decrees" [*sic*], copies of which they had obtained, forbade the hierarchy *expressis verbis* to consecrate any new bishops without the consent of the Pope. He therefore considered that it would be desirable to remove Beran from his position. He recommended that they should ask him for his resignation, and that, if he refused, he should be isolated in a place other than his residence. The proposal was approved, and on 7 March the Archbishop was detained and interned outside Prague.

Six bishops were invited to discussions. Four of them, Trochta, Pícha, Lazík and Čarský, and two auxiliaries, Onderek and Stehlík, were also invited to take the oath. The political correctness of this step was queried at a meeting of the "Church Six". Čepička asked if the oath taken by the bishops was not, in fact, a capitulation, because the bishops' appearance in public was enough in itself to reinforce the reaction at home and the actual power of the Vatican. Kopecký did not regard it as capitulation, and Fierlinger deemed it to be quite the contrary, a success — the united front of the episcopate would be broken as a result. The Presidium agreed with his view. The six dignitaries took the oath of loyalty to the government on 12 March, after signing a secret document containing all four conditions the day before. In the name of all church dignitaries present, Čarský read a proclamation written by the Office for Religious Affairs and approved by Gottwald. A few days later the bishops revoked the suspension of Plojhar and others.

The oath taken by the first few bishops led to the question of what should be done with the others. The possibility of inviting Matocha, Skoupý, Pobožný and Nescény to take the oath was discussed by the "Church Six" on 28 March, and by the Presidium a few days later. Again there were two different attitudes: Čepička and Nosek, the Minister of the Interior, saw in the bishops' willingness to take the oath a hidden interest in serving the Vatican. They judged that any further oaths would be a retrograde step in church-state relations. They fought for postponement ". . . until such time as the result of the oaths already taken is known." They were absolutely opposed to the Archbishop taking the oath. Fierlinger, on the contrary, saw in the oaths a new possibility of resolving the episcopal problem and achieving their aim without any great conflict. His argument was, that should further oaths be taken under the same conditions as the first six, ". . . we would have the whole episcopal office in our hands." The bishops would not be allowed to act on their own, without the consent of the Office for Religious Affairs, and they would be even more tied to strict cooperation with the state administration. To make it impossible to recreate a united episcopal front, no episcopal conferences could take place. Instead there would be meetings called by the Office for Religious Affairs. "Equally, no contact with the Vatican would be permitted, and certainly not the reinstatement of the Papal Legation." These combined measures would bring the aim of complete isolation of the church from the Vatican substantially nearer. Fierlinger's point of view prevailed. Nescény took the oath on 11 April. Skoupý did so after some delay, occasioned by his demand that his own addendum be added to the oath.

A calmer atmosphere in church-state relations emerged. Some priests as well as believers took the bishops' action as capitulation, but the majority considered it a necessary measure to save the church, and expected it would improve conditions for religious activities. Most state representatives considered the action to be a success because it helped to achieve the subordination of the bishops without any official agreement between the state and the church. The only ones dissatisfied were some functionaries of the party, State Security, and Ministry of Justice, who favoured a radical solution to the episcopal problem -- namely the removal of the bishops from their positions. The Vatican's attitude was expressed very clearly over a month later -- namely that the bishops were allowed to take the oath of loyalty only to the existing government. They could not promise loyalty to the Constitution, as the anti-church laws had been based on it. An oath which did not respect these principles ". . . meant treason against the church, or was merely the result of pressure put on the bishops, and therefore neither legally nor morally valid. In no way could it be

considered binding on the Vatican.”

The episcopal problem remained unsolved. Admittedly, the bishops put in an appearance in public, and partially fulfilled the tasks of their office. However, they remained under surveillance and were given “personal protection”, that is, a member of the State Security accompanied them all the time. *De facto* they had no say in church administration. Apart from this, in the Czech Lands, three bishops — Matocha, Skoupý and Hlouch — and in Slovakia, one — Pobožný — were not allowed to take the oath. The Office for Religious Affairs increased their isolation and yet, at the same time, during the years 1951-54, negotiated with them about taking the oath. The above-mentioned bishops refused to sign the conditions contained in the secret document of March 1951. They also had many other differences with the Office for Religious Affairs. In January 1953 Fierlinger recommended that Skoupý, Hlouch and Pobožný be detained as Beran had been. With Matocha, they decided on another approach. After the negotiations of 7 July 1954, which confirmed his refusal to give way on those matters of conscience which could not be reconciled with the state's religious policy, and his persistent recognition of papal authority, they decided on his house arrest and total isolation. They hoped to achieve “. . . his resignation and utter capitulation.”

Those who favoured a radical solution to the episcopal problem were also active. In the middle of June 1952, they worked on the fabrication of a case against Professor Oto Mádr and others. The victims were interrogated about the “criminal activity” of bishops. During the preparations for this trial, the Ministry of Justice was instructed to prepare a report about the criminal activities of Matocha, Lazík and Trochta. The report was finished on 20 June. All three were accused of secret correspondence with the Vatican, and the immediate arrest of Trochta was demanded. The leadership refused the demand, but a month later on 25 July, the Minister of State Security, Bacilek, repeated his request for Trochta's arrest. His reason was that “Trochta is under serious and well-documented suspicion of espionage on behalf of the Vatican.” The request was again refused, and it was decided to isolate Trochta completely. It was only in the autumn that the party leadership agreed to his arrest, but on 3 December they decided to postpone it. On 5 January a sergeant-major of the State Security prepared a warrant for Trochta's arrest and the junior Minister of Justice, Antonín Prchal, signed it. Trochta was arrested together with two other dignitaries of his diocese on 17 January 1953. It took a year to approve the charges against him. His trial took place in July 1954, and he was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment. The reason why Trochta was chosen, out of three

bishops selected by the State Security, is not known. Could it be that the supporters of a radical solution wanted to prove the ineffectiveness of all agreements with the bishops and of their oaths of loyalty? The bishops nonetheless stayed obedient to the Vatican. It is not inconceivable that even Trochta's retirement from public life had had an effect. It could have been interpreted as unwillingness to cooperate, or it could have been presented by the State Security as a preliminary step to his escape abroad. Trochta had actually asked for six months' leave in November 1951, and on 1 April 1952 had asked for permission to have his diocese administered by a vicar-general with extended jurisdiction.

The attempts to solve the episcopal problem worked in favour of the communists in one respect only: the episcopate as such no longer existed. The bishops had been eliminated or subordinated. Out of 17 bishops, 13 were either in prison or under house arrest; two were forbidden to carry out their duties; one was in enforced isolation and only one auxiliary was still performing his episcopal functions. The main aim of the state — to break the bishops' ties with the Vatican and make them oppose it — had not been achieved.

Though church-state relations were calmer after the above-mentioned oaths had been taken, the harshness of official religious policy was only negligibly milder. The supporters of a radical solution to the church problem had quite a substantial influence. For this reason any, even slight, improvements came about only as a result of pressure put on the communists, mainly by outside events, and never from their own initiative. They tried increasingly hard to resist such pressure; they disliked giving way, and did so less and less. The first signs of changes became apparent in the second half of 1953, at the beginning of a social crisis in some Eastern-bloc countries. The party and the government reacted by producing the so-called "Policy of New Direction". In Czechoslovak terms it meant very modest reforms in the political field. Within the framework of these reforms, certain measures of religious policy were abolished. In outline, the religious policy was still considered to be correct. The communist leadership, apprehensive because of the riots in the GDR and Hungary, postponed the implementation of its decision of 25 March 1953 to stop all the activities of religious orders on 1 July, and to dissolve them. The postponement was for one year for the male orders, and several years for the female orders. Another religious show-trial prepared for 1953, which should have included 97 persons, did not take place. There was a series of smaller trials instead.

On 20 November, Jaroslav Havelka, then the head of the Office for Religious Affairs, issued a directive on the aims of policy towards the church, based on the programme drawn up earlier by the government.

He ordered that all administrative wrongs which had been committed against priests and believers should be remedied. A fortnight later, at the Central Committee session, he criticised the practices of the lower party organs, citing a few extreme examples. In May 1954, the regional and district party organisations were instructed to adopt a more flexible attitude towards permitting church celebrations and festivities. The official registration of citizens' religious denomination was cancelled in July. In October, the so-called "personal protection" by members of the State Security of bishops who had taken the oath of loyalty came to an end. However, behind this façade of partial improvements, the state's religious policy continued to be harsh. A few statistics serve as proof of this: in 1951, 74 clergy were tried and convicted; in 1953, 73; in the following year, sixty, and in 1955 a further 46.

When the crisis in the Soviet-bloc countries grew in 1956, many priests and laymen used this opportunity, slight and temporary as it was, to increase their activity. The state organs were surprised. They received reports about successful attempts to increase numbers of religious services, pilgrimages, church processions, the creation of various youth clubs, and a greater loyalty to the Vatican. Increased unity among the clergy and increased contacts with bishops were also reported. "A large illegal network of lay apostolates", including the illegal reorganisation of dissolved religious orders, was considered especially dangerous. So was the fact that laymen were actively propagating Catholicism, since the bishops were compromised by their collaboration with the government, according to government reports in October 1958. "In some cases hundreds of people, including parish priests, nuns and laymen, belong to this movement", which was active in various parts of the republic. The substantial influence of the Vatican over the majority of clergy and the hierarchy was also noted. In 1956 a series of concrete demands was put forward. The bishops of Slovakia demanded a revision of the laws on religion. Suggestions that the function of District Church Secretaries (commissars) should be abolished came from all parts of the Republic. In eastern Slovakia, voices were raised calling for the reestablishment of the Uniates. In the archdiocese of Prague, a campaign was organised demanding Beran's restoration. Even the bishops joined in.

The Office for Religious Affairs suggested to the party leadership on 21 May 1956 that some bishops should be released from prison. Poland and Hungary, where the majority of imprisoned priests had been set free, were cited as examples. The transfer of Vojtaššák and Buzalka from prison to a geriatric hospital, and of Trochta and Zela to a detention centre, was also suggested. The report further stated,



with regard to Beran, that he was “. . . seeking reconciliation with the regime and his own restoration to office. He compares the policy of the last few years to the era of Emperor Joseph II.” The proposed resolution recommended negotiation with Beran and his reinstatement once he had taken the oath of loyalty. The members of the leadership disagreed with the proposed resolution. Rudolf Barák warned against any precipitate action. Jiří Hendrych was against following Poland and Hungary. He considered the existing measures to be correct, lawful and even humane. He was in principle against Beran’s return. Novotný put forward Plojhar’s point of view, “warning them not to release Beran”, and was himself entirely of the same opinion. Finally, a Commission was formed to prepare suggestions concerning a reduction in the sentences passed on imprisoned priests. The Ministry of the Interior was in no hurry. The Minister, Barák, reported after two months. Even the communist leadership criticised this slow progress. Zápotocký observed that “. . . the Commission worked slowly” and that it was “imperative to solve matters from the political point of view and not to play with details.” By 16 July 1956, 433 Catholic priests were registered as being in prison. Not all imprisoned priests were included in this number, only those who had already been sentenced. There were also priests who had been freed under the amnesty of 1949, those who had died in prison, and hundreds of priests held in detention centres or serving in technical detachments. The total number of priests had been halved during the ten years following February 1948.

To conclude, we shall attempt to present a balance sheet of the gains and losses on both sides. In eight years, the communists struck many cruel blows against the church. The worst, however, was, according to the Vatican, that

. . . the outer façade of the church, the church organisation, remained apparently untouched. All the changes in church administration and the nominations were carried out in apparent accordance with canon law. And yet, behind all that, mortal blows were directed against the church, church life and organisation.

According to the Vatican (1952): “The communists had already achieved their first goals.” However, this was the peak of their success. It had been achieved mostly by measures taken from a position of power, and these had reached their limit. Thereafter, their religious policy turned into a blind alley. The communists managed to cripple the church sufficiently to make it impossible for it fully to satisfy the religious needs of society or to have enough strength to be a political factor. However, the ultimate aim — the creation of a

national church — was not achieved. It is possible to say without any exaggeration that the clergy and faithful made that impossible. Any evaluation of the steps taken by the regime, including doubts as to their suitability, must take this reality into account. After all, in 1958, the Office for Religious Affairs was forced to admit that, although it had managed to neutralise the majority of priests, it did not win them over or destroy their recognition of the Vatican's authority. The relationship of the believers towards the church, the priests, and the Pope must have appeared to the regime in an even less favourable light. The communist success was minimal in the sphere of religious faith and sentiments — which cannot be directed by means of power.

Enough strength remained within and outside the church to bring about a rebirth of religious life. The Prague Spring demonstrated that quite clearly. In addition, many of the events of the last ten years in Czechoslovakia are sufficient proof of it.

*Translated from Czech by Julia Joannou*